youth development initiative

Gamers, Grrrls, and Gangs: Youth Subcultures, Scenes, Neo-Tribes and their role in Identity Development

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INTRODUCTION

Adolescence is a period of change and creativity where young people draw on adult and child like behaviors to negotiate identity development. During this period of change, youth begin to form social groups with others that have similar concerns and experiences and as a result different subcultures are born (Nayak, 2003). Most of the research on youth subcultures in the United States and the UK view these groups as forms of style, resistance and political opposition (Huq, 2006). Today, many youth subcultures are seen as micro-communities, which share a particular interest in music, taste, fashion, politics, art, sports, dance, and other social practices that provide a symbolic link to a parent culture, or the culture that preceded it (Nayak, 2003). However, since individuals frequently move in and out of youth subcultures, terms such as neo-tribes and scenes are more widely used (Haenfler, 2010). Examples of some of the areas pursued in research on subcultures include:

- feminism and exclusion of gender from subcultures (Kearney, 1998; McRobbie & Garber, 1976; Nayak &Kehily, 2008);
- misogyny and homophobia (Collins, 2006; Nayak &Kehily, 2008);
- popular culture and marketing (Batat, 2008);
- positive deviance and straightedge culture (Galliher, 2007; Haefler, 2004);
- racial identity (Mills & Huff, 1999; Nasir & Saxe, 2003; Nayak, 2003);
- racism (Brown, 2004; Wood, 1999);
- sexual identity (Giroux, 1998;Talburt, 2004);
- status and hierarchy in subcultures (Brake, 1993; Epstein, 1998);
- stigma (Haenfler, 2010; Hollands, 2002); and
- virtual communities and gamming (Haenfler, 2010);

RESEARCH TO PRACTICE POINTS

1. Young people thrive when they are able to explore their identity.
2. Language is a determining factor in youth subcultures and is critical to explore.
3. Youth racial identity and cultural heritage can be explored through youth subcultures.
4. Girls' subcultures exist beyond bedroom culture, and it is important to acknowledge these subcultures as a part of gender identity development.
5. The spaces that link subcultures, scenes and neo-tribes are changing due to advances in technology.

DETAILS ON RESEARCH TO PRACTICE POINTS

Young people thrive when they are able to explore their identity.

Subcultures provide a way to construct and perform an identity (Brake, 1993). Research suggests that when young people are able to explore who they are, they build critical skills for the future (Brake, 1993). Subcultures help youth explore aspects of their identity through interest in music, style, language, and gathering places (Huq, 2006). These choices are impacted by factors such as ethnic origin, gender, sexual orientation, social and educational status, and income status (Huq, 2006).

Language is a determining factor in youth subcultures and thus it is critical to explore.

From the "urban dictionary" to "fic slang" to "gang signs" and the smallest variation in dialects, language plays a significant role in the development of subcultures (Haenfler, 2010; Mendoza-Denton, 2008). Research suggests the importance of understanding the meaning of language in youth cultures (Nelsen & Rosenbaum, 1972). Knowledge of the terms used in conversations demonstrates not only acquaintance with the speaker, but also the sharing of their social world (Labov, 1992). Adults who gain a greater understanding of the language patterns of the youth they work with may increase their understanding of youth subcultures.

Racial identity and cultural heritage can be explored through youth subcultures.

Identities are not solely a result of genetics but rather are nurtured in social interactions in cultural spaces (Nasir & Saxe, 2003). Many minority youth have been associated with a subculture based upon music (e.g., hip-hop and African American youth and bhangra and South Asian youth; Huq, 2006; Mills & Huff, 1999). However, minority youth are a part of other scenes beyond musical genres, such as religious and political subcultures that enable them to ask critical questions about their identities and challenge racial prejudices (Greeley, 1975; McFarland, 2006). In addition, white youth may be seeking escape from traditional dominate forms of whiteness through subcultures (Nayak, 2003). Television, film, and media display popular stereotypes about youth that portray the meaning of gender, race, class and other identity markers. Subcultures through language, style, music, and rituals offer minority youth the opportunity to symbolically deny popular images of these racial boundaries and explore their own meanings and icons.

Girls' subcultures exist beyond bedroom culture, and it is important to acknowledge these subcultures as a part of gender identity development.

Girls participate in "bedroom culture," places where girls find friendship and fun in the safety of their own rooms (Haenfler, 2010). McRobbie and Garber (1976) suggest that in the safety of their rooms, girls can express cultural desires without publicly displaying a break with society's expectation of girls' behavior. Nevertheless, girls are going beyond the good girl/bad girl dichotomies and challenging subcultures that have been traditionally defined as male and excluded girls. Riot Grrrls, which started as a movement to infiltrate the male punk scene and fanficcers, who write stories about already existing characters from TV, movies, or comics, are just two examples of girls' subcultures moving beyond the "bedroom culture" and challenging accepted media images of gender and sexuality (Haenfler, 2010).

The spaces that link subcultures, scenes and neo-tribes are changing due to advances in technology.

Space is a container where subcultures take place for young people developing their own identity (Ruddick, 1998). With the advent of social media platforms, varying subculture practices and styles are able to expand worldwide and allow youth to try out different forms of identity. Consequently, the concepts of identity, self-expression, language, style, time, space and energy are continually refashioned by digital media (Batat, 2008). Facebook, twitter, chatting, blogging, virtual gamming, text messaging, and online shopping are just a few examples of how subcultures have new socialization practices.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

While keeping up with the changing terrain of youth subcultures may be daunting, there are many benefits to understanding these youth scenes. Research has begun to rethink youth cultures' impact on identity development (values, beliefs, relationship with adults) and rapid changes that take place within these cultures (Haenfler, 2010; Tait,1999). Research also is exploring how teen subcultures provide a social environment structure that provides (a)

additional protection from threats, either perceived or real, (b) social support and elevated power, (c) chances to acquire power or new social roles, and (d) opportunities to abide by a new code of rules and social controls within a familial environment (Wood & Alleyne, 2010).

Many youth who are involved in a subculture can feel alienated from the dominate norms and may need a place for acceptance or to perform social actions in their immediate context. Schools, youth programs, or youth workers who are not aware of subcultural groups, or who are not willing to engage these youth, may enhance conflicts between different groups and not be able to fully interact with these youth (Nayak, 2003). For youth practitioners, activities such as "Mix It Up Day," an initiative that was started by Teaching for Tolerance, may be a starting point. Mix It Up Day seeks to break down the barriers between students and improve intergroup relations so there are fewer misunderstandings that lead to conflicts, bullying, and harassment. Furthermore, relationships with positive adults can help encourage youth to explore their identity within their peer groups in a positive way (Huq, 2006).   For adults working with youth, it is important to listen to them, pay attention to the new language, styles, music, and technologies that are affecting their subcultural norms. In addition, providing youth with the opportunity to understand the underlying messages that they see in the media may be a helpful way to engage youth people who are feeling oppositional to the dominate culture.

AREAS WHERE ADDITIONAL RESEARCH IS NEEDED

More research is needed to determine how certain groups are marginalized within a particular subculture and if youth want to belong to a particular culture or scene but they don't find the support to explore their identity in that scene. Other areas of research can focus on how social networks, languages, and spaces are created amongst subcultures. Finally, more research is needed in the area of multi-ethnic relations present in subcultures

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ADDITIONAL RESOURCES AND REFERENCES

Teaching for Tolerance. http://www.tolerance.org/

The Fanfiction Glossary.
http://web.archive.org/web/20080822041856/http://www.subreality.com/glossary/terms.htm#F

The Merchants of Cool. This film about the creators and marketers of popular culture for teenagers can be watched can